

Indian Rose Annual - IRA 1987

THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

M.S. Viraraghavan

The saying 'Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder' has been repeated so often that it has become trite and commonplace. But what is not so obvious is why different eyes see so differently. This, however, becomes clear when we understand that perception is conditioned by numerous factors – sociological, cultural, historical and last of all, the climate in which the observation is made. But this is not an article on what the eye sees in general but one on perception of one aspect of the rose – its colour.

What we see as beautiful or desirable is definitely closely linked with sociological factors. An extreme example is the depiction of the Almighty as black and the Devil as white by certain Central African tribes, in startling contrast to the traditional view. An example nearer home are the various theories to the effect, that the god Krishna, who is depicted as blue-black, is the god of the Dravidians. I do not wish to enter into this controversy, which has racial overtones, but merely mention it as an example of how different the perception of what is desirable can be, depending on the background of the person concerned.

Such extreme examples apart, there is a surprising degree of difference in the acceptability of various types of colours to different persons. A typical instance is the colour magenta, - including within it shades of colour from reddish-purple to lavender. We in India, and especially in South India, love the rich reddish-purple colours; but to an Englishman they are anathema. No magenta coloured rose has any hope

of acceptance by the cognoscenti in the U.K., and even otherwise perfectly beautiful fragrant roses, like say Wendy Cussons, never quite made the grade on account of their magenta overtones. There is a simple historical or, perhaps, cultural factor involved, viz., that magenta was the colour of one of the first synthetic dyes evolved in the early years of the industrial revolution. So, cheap cloth in those days was coloured magenta, and looked at with disfavour by the prosperous. We see the hangover of this to this day.

Again, the climate has a profound impact in acceptability of colour. In a cool, damp climate, what an Indian rosarian may consider a beautiful pure lilac, comes out too often as a muddy grey. Even within our country, the contrast between the appearance of a rose like Blue Moon in the warm, dry climate of Hyderabad and a cool damp climate of Kodaikanal has to be seen to be believed. Likewise, the beautiful Papa Meilland, with its exquisite shades of red under-laid darker – one of the favourite roses of the Indian plains – is much less attractive when the weather turns cold and damp – when the black underlay changes to an unacceptable shade of purple.

Without going into further detail on the variations of the perception of colour, it is important to refer to one very important factor, which is closely related to pigment composition and their ability to transmit or reflect light. The pigments of the rose have already been dealt with in several earlier articles in our rose annuals. But the important fact to be noted is the differences in luminosity arising from whether the coloration of a flower is due to a water soluble pigment or one which is insoluble in water. In roses, as is well known, the anthocyanin pigments- cyanidin and pelargonidin, contribute the red and vermillion colours. Yellow to orange shades are derived from water soluble flavanols, the yellow colour of the old tea roses like Marechal Neil is entirely due to flavanol. Another source of yellow

colour- the source of the dark yellow to apricot tones are however the water insoluble carotenoid, and anthocyanin is responsible for the startlingly brilliant colours of modern roses.

But the point I would like to emphasize is that an excess of concentration of carotenoid very often leads, quoting Dr. David Leach, a well known authority not on roses, but on rhododendrons, 'to an opaque flower appearance without lustre or gloss'. In an interesting observation on what should be the ideal yellow rhododendron, which applies just as well to the ideal yellow rose, as rhododendron yellow colours are derived just as in roses from flavanol yellow, and carotenoid yellow, Dr. David Leach says, 'ideally, reinforcement by carotenoids to the extent that luminosity is not lost would yield a combination of transmitted yellow light via the flavanols and reflected yellow light from the carotenoids: there would be a trade-off of some brightness and vibrancy for greater colour saturation.' (Journal of the American Rhododendron Society, Winter 1982). Carrying the argument further, we may observe that the glow which we associate with some of the most beautiful roses is because of the petal texture allowing transmission of light to some extent. This is very evident in some of the colours of the roses in the 'Hand-painted' strain.

In this background of extreme complexity in the perception of colour, it is quite amazing that we hear the observation, when someone is buying a rose plant, that he will not have, say for example, another red rose merely because he has a red already in his collection. Such insensitivity stems from what can only politely be called ignorance-the doors of perception have not yet been opened.

In contrast to this attitude is the vivid description of colours by the well known authority, Michael Haworth-Booth ('Effective Flowering Shrubs'), based on the colour charts of the Royal Horticultural Society, U.K. Dealing with the blues, Haworth-Booth remarks that only bees like the

magenta colours- reddish purples or purplish pinks, ranging from Solferino purple and going bluer all the way through magenta itself- fuschia pink, fuschia purple, rhodamine purple, peony purple. Mallow purple to cyclamen purple; next, and still going bluer all the time, we reach orchid purple and petunia purple, then onto mauve and imperial purple which are followed by the violets. This range of colours can be visualized if we think of the colours of roses starting from Swarthmore, Kanchi, Manou Meilland, Purple Beauty, Violaine, News and the latest International Herald Tribune, which is just short of imperial purple. Anything less red than violet is blue. The reader should note the incredible range in the blue tones itself, as also the point made earlier that what is a desirable shade in this range varies with the observer.

Again in the pink and red colours which Haworth-Booth describes in sequence, he starts with rose Bengal, a slightly purplish pink, then phlox pink the pink of cake icing, Tyrrian roses, rose madder (rose pink), Neyron rose, a warmer redder shade like the rose Paul Neyron and then crimson itself, the colour of Crimson Glory. Thereafter, and going redder still, we have turkey red. Coming to the pinks again, but this time pinks with an orange cast, we have shades like carmine rose (colour of the rose Picture), geranium lake (colour of Super Star), and thereafter scarlet (colour of Independence), and signal red (the colour of City of Belfast). Even more orange are mandarin red, the pure pomegranate colour, shrimp red soft orange, poppy red and fire red.

Again, among the yellows, starting with the green end, are shades like sulphur yellow (Etoile de Lyon), primrose yellow (Grandpa Dickson), Dresden yellow, canary yellow, (Diamond Jubilee), Indian yellow, Chinese yellow, saffron yellow, (Miss Harp), and maize yellow. If you go oranger still, we have shades like cadmium orange, followed by apricot (colour of Oldtimer), tangerine orange (the colour of Chantrelle), and orpiment orange,

orange still-just a shade redder than the peel of a Nagpur orange.

So, readers should beware of the common habit of classifying roses in a highly mechanical manner as red, yellow, pink, etc., without regard to the nuances of shades and the combinations of light, transmitted and reflected, involved.

One other general observation which deserves emphasis. Particularly under Indian conditions, is the peculiar fascination for odd colours. Surely a black rose or a green rose is not the most desirable of rose colours? But this is what the novice asks for, much to the horror of a good rosarian. Obviously, he would not apply the standard of just being different if he was selecting girl friend!

What follows is an account of rose colours as I feel they should be perceived. I make no excuses for being dogmatic. Starting with red, which is, of course, the most popular of rose colours, the most beautiful shade, to my mind, is pure crimson, but with an underlay of black. A typical instance is Papa Meilland, or, in a cooler climate, the colour of Black Beauty. In their search for unfading reds, rose breeders seem to be giving too much importance to pure bright reds, for e.g. Olympiad, which has entirely lost richness in the absence of the black shading. Even worse are dull opaque reds of the type of Gladiator and Toro, to be condemned without a second glance, on this score alone, without going into their monstrous size.

In pinks, I feel some of the most beautiful shades are those in which the colour is blended and translucent. Some of the most eye-catching pink roses have this unique quality — Shot Silk, Picture, Tiffany, Michelle Meilland, but not that exhibitor's delight, First Prize with its blotchy matt finish.

Among the lilacs, my pet aversion is to lilacs edged pink, which excepting under ideal conditions makes for a very disagreeable contrast. Typical instances are Paradise and Angel Face, and even worse is Blue

Parfum. What chance have these when compared with the pure clear silver lilac of Sterling Silver, the slightly less translucent tone of Blue Moon, or in a cold climate, the shimmering violet effect of Ripples?

Coming to the yellow shades, the emphasis on darker and darker yellows is misplaced, which arises from the fact that the darker the shade, the more the carotenoid pigment and so, duller the effect. Some of the most beautiful yellow roses are those in the colours of Lemon Spice and Julien Potin, whereas darker roses like Bellona appear dull. Some of the most lovely yellow to orange shades are found in the Tea roses, for e.g. the luminous perfection of a bud of Lady Hillingdon is yet to be matched; though roses like Oldtimer or Vienna Charm do come close, though overlarge. One of the most lovely colours is the combined carotenoid-pelargonidin effect with the luminous translucence retained — of roses like Lover's Meeting and Belinda and Tanya.

Among the bicolours, red and white, and red and yellow, what I look for is a sharp demarcation of the colour spread. The very popular Double Delight suffers too often from the pink/red spreading on to the white, as the bud opens. Bicolours should also hold their colour without the colour contrast becoming strident as happens in Kronenburg in the second day after it opens when the pinkish red of the inner surface of the petals change to reddish purple.

Even within what appears to be as uncomplicated a colour as white, there is a great deal of variation. The pure snow white of the old Hybrid Perpetual, Frau Karl Druschki has yet to be bettered, though Honor does come close. But all too often, rosarians go into raptures over roses like Louisiana, which has a lot of cream, detracting from the purity of the white, or, horror of horrors, John. F. Kennedy, white unpleasantly tinged green. Of the white tinged pink roses, surely the most beautiful is Pristine, with its luminous pearl-like finish.

The strongest reactions of course occur to the strongest colours, and, to this day, vermillion roses are always a subject of controversy. The hot, orange-red colours, e.g. Independence, are, very often, too artificial to be really capable of being appreciated in a garden setting. To add to the unattractiveness, is the purple shading very often found on the outside of the petals of roses of such colour. In beautiful contrast, are the pastel vermillions such as Super Star, and attempts to improve on it by intensifying the vermillion really appear to me to be moves in the wrong direction.

So before I close, I would again reiterate that we rose growers must ever be careful not to shut the doors of perception, lest we become like one of my friends, who was a keen motorist and saw only three colours — red, amber and green!

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